

The Word In Search Of Words
John 6:41-51
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The burden of presuming to preach the Gospel is in the conviction that Jesus was altogether serious when He said, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger." The continuing anxiety of the preacher is the sense that the Gospel isn't getting said, heard or understood with anything which resembles that original clarity and urgency.

For many reasons the pulpit, the place where we have come to expect the Word of God to find human words with which to be heard, is in trouble. Practically every book written about the institutional church in the past two decades has had something negative to say about preaching - both as a form of communication and as the primary vehicle for relating the truth of the Christian Faith. The twenty minute, classic, three point Protestant sermon has become somewhat of an anachronism, it seems. A survey taken by one of our professional journals recently revealed that about half of the church attenders could not recall much of what the preacher said by sundown Sunday. By the middle of the week nearly everyone had forgotten, and at the end of the week very few could remember the title. Another study revealed the fact that hardly anyone expects a sermon to deal with issues that matter in real life. But perhaps the most devastating indictment of all came in the midst of routine business in the office of this Church last week. One of the staff persons was discussing the possibility of purchasing air time with a sales representative from a local radio station. The problem was that the service would have to be recorded and then broadcast a week later. Our staff person was commenting on the disadvantages of this system in that sometimes sermon material and illustrations are immediate, current and therefore dated. Whereupon the sales representative suggested that perhaps the ministers wouldn't have to talk about current events and matters of immediate concern and instead confine themselves to preaching sermons.

The late Paul Scherer, Professor of Homiletics at Princeton and Union Theological Seminaries, used to lament the lack of power in the American pulpit and called most of the sermons he heard "Helpful Hints for Hurtful Habits". Theodore Wedel thinks that a whole generation of Americans has grown up "which has actually never heard the Christian Gospel; only the Reader's Digest version of it, the success-story rendition, log cabin to White House, whereas, of course, the Incarnation is quite the other way around". And a leading Roman Catholic theologian once suggested that if Protestantism ever dies of an assassin's wound, the dagger in its back will be the Protestant Sermon. I suppose we've all heard sermons which led us to the same conclusion. (See Scherer, The Word God Sent, p.5).

Yet the tradition of the Protestant pulpit is a long and noble one. It is impossible even to contemplate Protestantism apart from the central and important role played by preaching. One of the books I read on vacation this summer was a new biography of John Calvin. I was impressed with the absolute certainty with which Calvin identified preaching from the pulpit with the Word of God. When a preacher studies a text, works at it, prays about it, and speaks to his people, according to Calvin, his words become the Word of God to them. And although we may entertain that in some back corner of our minds it would be a rare preacher today with the audacity to put it in those words. Consider how Herman Melville described it in his classic Moby Dick - "The pulpit is ever this earth's foremost part...The world's a ship on its passage out...and the pulpit is its prow". (Ibid, p.5). Compare that with the verdict rendered in "The Message and Silence of the American Pulpit", a book written by a Bishop of the Church of South India. The message, he wrote, had largely to do with playgrounds and plumbing, patriotism and labor, Mother's Day and the United Nations.

The silence had to do with what the New Testament calls the Kerygma, the word of reconciliation and life."

Preachers and people who regularly listen to sermons, are stung by that, of course, but more important is the possibility that being stung will motivate those of us who preach and listen to sermons to think critically about the exercise and to become more adept - to be better preachers and hearers.

The problems we face today, it turns out, are not new ones. I refer you to the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John. It is a remarkable portion of scripture. The chapter begins with the feeding of the five thousand. The scholars feel that this particular portion of the Fourth Gospel was assembled with a developing sacramental theology already in mind. "Jesus took the loaves of bread and when He had given thanks He distributed them", is the way John describes it. After the event on the lake in which He was seen walking on the water, He went to Capernaum followed by the crowds who had heard about the miraculous feeding. The bread motif continued in the Capernaum synagogue when He said, "I am the bread of life". And in the lesson this morning the people in and about that synagogue are grumbling because of those particular words. "After all", they said, "it's only Jesus. We know His Mother and Father." They were too literalistic about the metaphor of bread. They were not open to what He was saying about God and about themselves for the simple reason that they knew He was merely the carpenter's son. They didn't hear Him. He said the words - but the words were not heard.

So today, it should not be surprising that we have difficulty hearing the Gospel from the pulpit with clarity and urgency, with some sense that what is said here is important enough to be taken seriously, understood and - in some way - responded to. Let's think first about the sermon as a vehicle of communication, an exercise in which ideas are expressed, received and understood. It is not an overstatement to suggest that we are obsessed with communication. There are veritable libraries of books written on the subject: how to communicate with your spouse, children, teachers, students, employers, employees. We are obsessed with it as a topic of discussion and we have at our fingertips the means to do more of it than any people before us. We speak almost reverently about the miracle of modern communication.

Yet one of the prime ironies of our age seems to be that the more capability for communicating we develop, the less we seem to have to say to one another. The prototype of our electronic dilemma was the convention coverage which brought into our living rooms those interminable demonstrations for the nominees, leaving highly skilled, highly paid commentators with thirty or forty minutes of prime time and nothing to say. Walt Whitman was prophetic, when, having been told about the completion of the first telephone line between Maine and Texas, asked, "But what if the people of Maine have nothing to say to the people of Texas?" In 1962 the first pictures were transmitted between Paris and New York by Satellite. We sent them a shot of our flag and they returned a picture of a night club. The New Yorker satirized it magnificently in a cartoon. A man was sitting in his easy chair viewing a line of can-can dancers on the television screen while underneath ran the caption, "What wonders God hath wrought". (Scherer p.7).

We have at our disposal both the technology and the psychological insight to communicate more and better than ever before. Yet communication between people, not simply ministers and lay people - but all people, seems more difficult, more elusive than ever. The Bible suggests a reason which has little to do with technology. Human Beings, the Bible asserts, were created for communion with God and with one another.

But from the beginning alienation, not communication, has been our story. The first communication device mankind developed, according to the Bible, was a tower - The Tower of Babel. And that early technology made matters worse. The result was that no one could understand anyone else.

Who hasn't experienced the terrible contemporary truth of that ancient insight? It's not a matter merely of learning how to talk better. Who hasn't discovered the irony of attempting to communicate with someone and discovering that the silence was not improved upon (as they say in Maine) and that the relationship was weakened as a result of the attempt instead of being strengthened?

Ingmar Bergman, the great Swedish film maker, creates some very depressing movies because of his relentless honesty about the human condition. In "Scenes From a Marriage", a husband and wife who have good jobs and all the accoutrements of the good life become aware of the fact that they can't communicate. As they learn to communicate their relationship begins to fall apart. And for the rest of the film they communicate candidly, openly and frequently, but the relationship is gone.

The fact is that what is marketed as communication in our culture today has little to do with that "communion" from which the word communication derives. Rather it ordinarily means talking more and listening less.

A breakdown in communication - or communion - whether or not people are talking at each other is simply an emergence of what we used to have the honesty to call sin. We don't communicate with one another because at heart we don't really want to. We don't want to acknowledge that we are incomplete, that others have truth we need. We are not as interested in the opinions, feelings and ideas of another as we are in gaining an opportunity to express our opinions and ventilate our feelings. Communication assumes the grace to be quiet - not simply physically quiet, but emotionally and intellectually quiet - in the idiom of electronic communication it presumes the willingness - and ability - to be a receiver as well as a transmitter.

And that, the Christian analysis suggests, is precisely what we will not and cannot do. Our communication crisis is not an inadequacy in technology or psychology - it is a matter of self-centeredness. We don't hear our children, our spouses, our parents - the Word of God - because we don't want to.

The Tyranny of the Self, Joseph Sittler calls it. (The Ecology of Faith). According to Saint Augustine, sin is the "curvature of the self inward upon itself". But in our day the self, the ego, with a heavy assist from pop psychology, has been elevated to a position of judge and jury. "You do your own thing and I'll do my own thing" has become the byword. Sittler writes: "What is new is that an incurvature which has traditionally been viewed in Christian teaching as a disposition to be overcome is among many in our day jubilantly cultivated as a way of redemption. There is a difference between regarding the self as a theatre of redemption and regarding the recovery of the self as the substance of redemption." (p.12). Albert Outler in a speech I heard recently talked about the overwhelming self-centeredness of our culture focused on modern art. Instead of stretching to communicate some of the given beauty and truth of the universe, the traditional function of the artist, modern art allows for an embarrassed trip through someone's demented ego, a psychic strip tease which, it is now assumed, is edifying to those who will watch. Sittler summarizes it eloquently. In a class on the doctrines developed by the ancient church fathers at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, one of the theological students responded, "But Doc, I can't internalize this stuff."

In a recent issue of New York magazine Tom Wolfe has written about this great celebration of egocentricity in which we find ourselves in an article under the title, "The Me Generation". He observes, "The new alchemical dream is: changing one's personality - reamking, remodeling, evaluating and polishing one's very own self...and observing, studying and doting on it."

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." There are many reasons why preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a perilous undertaking; reasons why the twenty minute sermon doesn't always seem to be the place where God's saving word finds the words with which to be heard.

What I have tried to do this morning is isolate and identify the reason which is an inherent part of the human condition: a reason clearly part of that encounter between Jesus and a group of reasonably intelligent people in a Capernaum synagogue.

He said, "I am the bread of life." That statement presumes hunger. More than that, if it is to be heard it presumes the grace and courage to acknowledge hunger. It presumes that the source of fulfillment for our hunger is located somewhere outside the self.

All the weight of our obsession with self realization, self fulfillment, self actualization and honest, open communication seems to be saying the opposite. The pop-psychology which addresses us from every new book, every magazine and journal seems to be announcing a new gospel: that the ability to achieve fulfillment and to communicate with others is inside ourselves. The secret is simply to know about it, read - attend a seminar, understand it, affirm it and then try harder.

Long ago Karl Jung saw the flaw in that. Writing about the Freudian school he said, "Freud has unfortunately overlooked the fact that man has never yet been able single handed to hold his own against the powers of darkness...Man is never helped in his suffering by what he thinks for himself, but only by revelation of a wisdom greater than his own." (Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 8, p. 567).

Preaching and listening to sermons is the weekly effort to communicate the audacious Christian claim that Jesus of Nazareth - Jesus the Christ - is indeed the Bread of Life. That is the Word of God always searching for human words with which to be heard: that this man - this Jesus - is what you and I need more than anything else in life.

My assumption is that we are not going to hear that Word regardless of the relative excellence, wit and passion of the particular preacher until we acknowledge our hunger, our incompleteness, our need.

My growing assumption, about which I speak today with more certainty than ever, is that one of the things God does best is to make us aware of our hunger. God, I believe, works quietly in our lives to make us restless, to pose questions we cannot answer, to present quandaries of conscience from which we cannot escape. It is God, I believe, who plays devil's advocate with us when we purchase and try to live on bread, other than the bread of life he offers. It is God who makes us hungry. Unamuno, the Spanish poet, once wrote a line I am just beginning to understand, "God never denies a man peace, except to give him glory!"

The Word of God is a living Word. It is the very nature of God to be in communion with us. And He has made us for the same. His Word is always in search of words: it comes in strange ways and unexpected places. The simple invitation of the Gospel is to make the ultimately necessary admission - "I'm hungry" and then to hear again God's Word finding words..."I am the bread of life". Amen.